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A Better Suburbia

by Mark Francis

Visiting "Village Homes" for the first time, one is struck by how different this 1970s-era community looks from typical California developments. Arriving by car, one notices narrower streets and less visually dominant parking, with access kept to the edges along long, narrow cul-de-sac streets.

A visitor arriving by bike or on foot is led through the neighborhood along a green network of continuous paths lined with native and edible vegetation. It quickly becomes apparent that it is easier to walk or bike here than to drive.

One encounters a diverse mix of open spaces including small common areas between groups of houses, larger greenways along main bike and pedestrian paths, turf areas for sports, and agricultural landscapes scattered throughout the neighborhood with orchards, vineyards, and community gardens.

Many of these spaces are not simply "look-at" spaces found in more manicured developments. There are people actually using these open spaces — walking, digging, or playing, for



At the Village Homes development, planners laid out bicycle and pedestrian paths to encourage residents not to drive.
 Photo: Tom Lamb



Village Homes site plan.
 Image: Judy Corbett

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example. When empty, there are physical traces of use such as garden furniture, tools, and children's toys. This activity communicates a sense of stewardship, of people caring for and feeling attached to where they live.

POPQUIZ

Also striking at Village Homes is the lack of some design elements promoted as essential in New Urbanist developments. There are no front porches, and front doors are often hidden at the side of houses. The developers could not decide if the front door should face the street or the common areas, so they compromised and placed them on the sides of houses.

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A Better Suburbia

continued

The focus is on community space such as common areas, gardens, and green space rather than on the public spaces of formal parks and pedestrian streets found in neotraditional developments.

Design and Planning Concepts

Village Homes combines older design and planning principles with newer, more innovative ideas. Many of basic concepts, as the developers admit, are drawn directly from earlier greenbelt communities. The idea of a residential area organized around open space (instead of the street) is a longstanding and popular planning concept.

The physical planning principles grow directly from the larger social and environmental goals for the community. For instance, all streets run east-west and all lots are oriented north-south, making full use of the sun's energy.

The roads are all narrow, curving cul-de-sacs, less than 25 feet (7.6 meters) wide and generally are not bordered by sidewalks. Their narrow widths minimize the amount of pavement exposed to the sun in the long, hot



FREE TRIAL IMAGE

*At the Village Homes development, designers provided a diversity of housing types, including these apartments on the southern edge.
Photo: Tom Lamb*



*The focus of community life is in the common areas, each designed and built by the adjacent residents.
Photo: Tom Lamb*

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summers. The curving lines of the roads give them the look of village lanes, and the few cars that venture into the cul-de-sacs usually travel slowly.

The common areas contain an innovative natural drainage system, a network of creek beds, swales, and pond areas that allow rainwater to be absorbed into the ground rather than carried away through storm drains. Besides helping to store moisture in the soil, this system recharges the water table and provides a visually interesting backdrop for landscape design.

POPQUIZ

The ecological approach of open channel drainage (instead of catch basins and underground pipes) reportedly saved enough money to pay for most landscape improvements in the development, including walkways, gardens, and other landscape amenities.

Traffic-protected open areas form safe play spaces for children. Residents have built playgrounds for their children in some of these open spaces and modified them as the kids grew older. They have experienced some problems with nonresidents using the open spaces and picking fruit.

Edible Landscape

Much of the plant material in Village Homes is either edible or native. Residents can pick fruit right outside their houses in most common areas. The edible landscape includes oranges, almonds, apricots, pears, grapes, persimmons, peaches, cherries, and plums.



Cross section of a common area with open-channel drainage.

Image: Judy Corbett



Village Homes, aerial view.

Photo: Mark Francis



Passive solar design includes deciduous vegetation that shades the south side of houses in the summer.

Photo: Tom Lamb

Community gardens located on the west side of the neighborhood provide organic produce, some of which is sold to local restaurants and markets. Annual harvest festivals bring residents together. This edible landscape has created a diverse and somewhat overgrown character to the neighborhood.

Some nonresidents have commented that the overall landscape is "an eyesore" and needs a great amount of maintenance. On the other hand, residents get pleasure in seeing the seasonal cycles of nature expressed in the Village's vegetation and open spaces.

Circulation

Pedestrian and bicycle paths were laid out before the streets and receive higher emphasis. The greatest travel time within the neighborhood is five minutes, typically without ever crossing a road. The daycare center (located in the Community Center), the Plumshire Inn restaurant, and a dance studio are no more than a five-minute walk from any house.

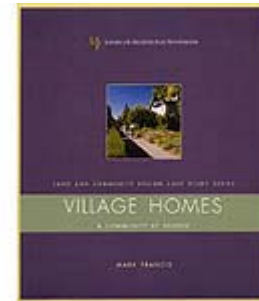
No other services are provided in the community. Grocery stores and other services are a short bicycle ride away, although most residents use cars to shop in neighborhood centers or in downtown Davis. Large purchases generally are made in Woodland, 10 miles to the north, or in Sacramento, 15 miles east.

The use of narrow and cul-de-sac streets in Village Homes appear to



While common areas are unfenced, the fronts of houses along cul-de-sac streets are typically enclosed for privacy.

Photo: Tom Lamb



Village Homes, written by Mark Francis.

Image: Island Press, photo by Tom Lamb

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result in traffic-calming benefits. The long and narrow streets also accomplish this but lead to other problems, such as lack of visitor parking.

Energy Use and Conservation

A well-publicized aspect of Village Homes is its reported lower use of energy. This is a result of a combination of the passive solar house designs, south-facing site orientation, and south and west side shading. Natural heating and cooling are accomplished through both passive and active systems.

All houses can accommodate solar panels, and their orientation also allows south-facing windows to be shaded in the summer by overhangs and deciduous vegetation. Houses incorporate passive heating and cooling, are well insulated, and have a substantial thermal mass.

Solar hot water systems, when used, typically meet up to 100 percent of a household's hot water needs in the summer and above 50 percent in the winter. Street trees shade roads and reduce ambient air temperatures by as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit (5.6 degrees Centigrade), which is significant on hot summer days.

Community Economics

The early vision was to develop, as much as possible, an economically self-sufficient community. Moneymaking ventures were envisioned through different types of agriculture, office developments, and an inn. Only some

of this has been realized.

Office space owned by the Village Homeowners Association is rented, as is the Community Center. The Community Center is very popular for weddings and family reunions and is often booked. Board-sponsored events as well as free classes, parties, and meetings are exempt from fees.

Most residents are employed by the University of California or in Sacramento, the state capital. There are a few employment opportunities in the village — at the office complex, restaurant, daycare center, or the Village Homeowners Association.

Although Village Homes has a 30-year history showing both successes and failures, it is a case study that remains of interest to modern planners interested in sustainable communities.

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Mark Francis, FASLA is professor of landscape architecture at the University of California, Davis, and senior design consultant with [Moore Iacofano Goltsman](#).

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